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The Project - "Northern Arizona Regional Focused Future"

The Northern Arizona Council of Governments (NACOG), an Economic Development District as designated by the United States Department of Commerce-Economic Development Administration, covers the four Northern Arizona Counties of Apache, Coconino, Navajo, and Yavapai.

The Northern Arizona Region displays diverse climates, terrains, history, culture, populations, interests, and community needs. Covering approximately 48,900 square miles and incorporating Indian reservation land, the region has an unemployment rate range of 3.5% to 8% and has been designated the second highest poverty region in the country. We are experiencing business growth and expansion at high rates and population in-migration at 4.7%, which reinforces the need for a competitive labor force.

The NACOG Regional Council (governing board) and the NACOG-Economic Development Committee (a volunteer membership appointed by the NACOG Regional Council) for many years has actively sought out, initiated, and set goals for economic development projects and activities within the four-county region. Members of these two entities encompass local elected officials and other city/county entities, tribal representatives and the private sector. Keeping well informed, each of these members gathers and disburses information to/from their communities and the Council/Committee. All meetings are open to the public for information and input.

The NACOG-Economic Development Committee partnered with Arizona Public Service (APS), the Economic Development Administration (EDA), Workforce Development Areas, Regional Transportation, Community Development Block Grants, and other public and private entities including representatives of: housing, education, elected officials, Native American tribal councils, chambers of commerce,

economic development, forestry, and private industry to initiate Focused Future Strategic Planning Project for Northern Arizona

Surveys indicated that at least 35 separate entities were preparing individual plans for their communities/programs. By partnering our efforts, we could take advantage of all social, economic, political, and technical forces within the region. The Regional Focused Future Project hopes to take those 35 separate plans, incorporate and condense information that will streamline planning efforts, expedite services and display accomplishment.

The Focused Future Program, a project of the Arizona Public Service (APS)-Economic & Community Development, contracts a facilitator who presides over and documents all meeting/project details and provides the incentive and challenges toward success. APS, a private utility company, donated cash and in-kind contributions in excess of \$30,000. The RDA matched these funds with a \$6,000 cash contribution together with annual planning grant funds.

The Project is a comprehensive, cooperative process to evaluate the region's competitive advantage and identify specific strategies to create jobs, foster more stable and diversified economies, and improve the region's quality of life. The process helps define mutual planning and benefit for the Region, takes individual thinking "out of the local box," and focuses on working together toward regional outcomes.

Focused Future was established to empower and help strengthen skills so that communities/regions can handle future development challenges by: defining the goals that will ensure an economic future; uncovering strengths and weaknesses; creating policies and implementing practical programs that enhance the economy; and becoming educated to the strengths and weaknesses of neighboring communities.

The State of Arizona completed a state-of-the-art strategic plan that pioneered concepts promoting economic diversity and stability. The plan recognizes Arizona's need to transition from an economy driven by population growth toward an economy that prospers through more advanced skills, a better use of technologies, and more sophisticated entrepreneurship. Success in this innovation-driven economy is measured by increases in the standard of living (real wages and per capita income), not simply by more jobs or population growth.

The Arizona Strategic Plan for Economic Development (ASPED) developed new approaches to economic development organized around three concepts--quality jobs, cluster, and foundations. The plan is being implemented by the Governor's Strategic Partnership for Economic Development (GSPED).

With these state plans in hand, a dedicated Regional Focused Future Action Team is meeting monthly and developing a plan-of-action for the Region. All meetings are open to the public, periodic public hearings are held, and press releases have been

published in local newspapers to make our citizens aware of the project and its progress.

To date, our acquired knowledge has been invaluable as we recognize and define our resources and our needs and begin establishing our goals. The Action Team examined definitions pertinent to the project outcome, including:

Quality Jobs--Jobs with rising real wages and opportunities for advancement;

- Clusters--Concentrations of firms across several industries that create quality jobs and share common economic foundation needs; and
- Foundations--Community-provided resources, such as education and physical infrastructure, which are the building blocks for economic clusters and the source of productivity and growth that are essential for prosperity.

Foundations include:

- Capital--money necessary for new business to form and existing businesses to grow and expand;
- Tax and Regulations--financial and operational business structure with the state or community by direct action of the government, and needing stable, predictable, and uniform tax rates and compliance requirements;
- Human Resources--more and better skilled workforce to meet managerial, technical, administrative, professional, entrepreneurial, entry-level, and labor needs of the economy;
- Physical Infrastructure--fundamental public facilities, such as roads, mass transit, water/sewage systems, airports, railways, power, and phone lines that provide a quality place to live and do business;
- Information/Communication Infrastructure--foundation of computers, databases, networks, software, and facilities management that allows transmission of voice, image, and data within the state and with the outside world; and
- Quality of Life--the attractiveness and desirability of a location as a place to live, raise a and conduct business.

The Action Team has also examined our Region as a product or a business. Taking survey of our business factors as a prospective business considering making an investment in our area. We have considered our accessibility as it pertains to: marketing (availability to move goods and services); labor market (potential workforce); resources (proximity to raw materials utilized in the processing or manufacturing of products); space (availability of land and buildings that business can readily acquire or develop); and capital (availability of financial sources for business development). Other questions considered were:

- Does the area have organized local economic development efforts that focus on improving the economy?...even the smallest communities today have

- local programs/staff working on economic development;
- What about government's impact on business, is the local climate conducive to business development and expansion?...businesses are looking for consistency and fairness local regulations and assurance that their investment will be protected; and
- Does the area provide a good place to live, raise a family, and have quality of life?...business looks for a good location to do business, but also as a home for their families and employees.

Our project is a work in progress...with meetings scheduled through early/mid 2000. We are gratified with the results to date, the trust and respect that has been established and the enthusiasm expressed by the Action Team Members. We are extremely proud to note that this innovative endeavor is the first project of this size in Arizona, and is being considered a role model for other areas of Arizona and across the country.

The process will produce a 5-year plan/document that will include: a description of the problems, needs, potentials, and resources of the region; present the regional vision and goals; outline the strategic direction for an action plan; establish priority programs and projects for implementation; and outline the standards for annual evaluation and update. The plan will also meet all EDA requirements for the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS).